



# Making Time for Fitness

## even though you're really, truly busy!

Regular exercise improves physical health and mental wellbeing. It significantly reduces the risk of heart disease and other life-threatening conditions. It's key to reaching and maintaining a healthy weight and to staying mobile and self-sufficient later in life. Common knowledge, right? And yet, approximately 26% of American adults are sedentary, and another 55% get less than the recommended "30 minutes or more per day, most days of the week."<sup>1, 2</sup>

Why? Most people say the main reason they don't exercise is lack of time.

### Step One: Assess Your Priorities

If you think you're too busy to spend 30-60 minutes per day being active, keep a log of everything you do for a week so you can identify blocks of time you could swap for or combine with exercise. Do you watch two hours of television per day? Trade some of that time for playing your favorite sport, or set up a treadmill or exercise bike in front of the TV. Do you meet with friends several times a week for lunch or coffee? Turn your coffee dates into power-walks.

Once you've identified blocks of time that would be conducive to getting active, schedule four to five half-hour time slots in advance. You can also be on the lookout for spontaneous opportunities to walk, bike, dance, stretch or otherwise get moving.

### Leisure Time? What's That?

Say you've tracked how you spend your time for a full week and it only proves what you knew all along: virtually every waking hour is consumed by obligations. Chances are you are in one of the following situations:

- You work demanding hours
- You are a parent of young children or a fulltime caregiver
- You are a working parent

If you are in one of these categories, the challenge to find time (and energy) to exercise is real and daunting. But you *can* do it, and here's how.

### All Work and No Play...

With some jobs, you never see the light of day let alone the inside of a gym. If that's your situation, use one or more of these tips to make time for exercise:

- Get up earlier. Not everyone's a morning person, but try it and you might surprise yourself. Get up early, roll out of bed and hit the gym or the running trail. Or take a brisk walk to your favorite coffee shop.
- Use your commute. Can you walk or bike to work? You can also consider parking further from the office or getting off the bus a few stops from work.
- Take a mid-day exercise break. Put it on your calendar and treat it like any other meeting or appointment.
- Don't go straight home! Instead, grab a healthy snack after work and then join a pick-up game or swim a few laps before heading home.
- Do *not* work weekends if you can help it. If it's unavoidable, at least set a limit on the number of hours you'll work, and stick to it. Plan something active, such as dancing, gardening or hiking, for every weekend.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005." Chapter 4, "Physical Activity."

<sup>2</sup> CDC, "Prevalence of physical inactivity, including lifestyle activities among adults – United States, 2000-2001." Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 2003;52; 764-9.

## The Parent Trap

No matter how rewarding it is in so many ways, caring for young children on a fulltime basis (or being the primary caregiver for an ailing spouse or elderly parents) can be physically and mentally exhausting. If you're feeling trapped by your care giving duties, you need to exercise for physical fitness but also to give yourself a break. Try these tips:

- Be active with the kids. Strap them in the stroller for a run or brisk walk. Walk to school or play dates. Go to the park and play tag. Walk the dog together.
- Find a friend with similar-aged kids. Alternate outings with your friend and the kids with babysitting swaps, so each of you can get some solitary time for a more intense and/or more peaceful workout.
- Join a YMCA or gym that has a childcare center.
- Get a babysitter and go out with your spouse or partner. Instead of dinner and a movie, go dancing, bowling or hiking.
- If you have trouble finding a half hour block of time to really get your heart rate up, stay active in small bursts. Run, do push-ups, stretch, dance or climb the stairs for 10-15 minutes two to three times a day.

When you have young children, keep in mind that you're building a base for the future – for you *and* your kids. Hiking with a three-year-old might not get your heart pumping, but it will probably establish hiking as a popular family activity. A few years down the road you can do “real” hikes with your children, and before you know it they'll be challenging *you* to keep up!

## Working Parents

What if you work fulltime *and* have kids? Hopefully you've spotted tips you can use in the sections above, but here are a few extra ideas especially for you:

- Steal ten minutes here and there. Park further from your destination or get off the bus a few stops early; take the stairs instead of the elevator; wear a pedometer and try to increase the number of steps you take every day.
- Go outside for 10 minutes with the kids even though it's almost dinnertime. (Once you've mustered up the energy it takes to get out the door with little ones, you might find the outdoor play refreshing and want to stay out longer.)
- Play! Freeze dance, duck-duck-goose and tag can get your heart rate up more quickly than you'd imagine, so you can get in a decent amount of activity with a few 15-minute games per day.
- Designate Saturday or Sunday as family adventure day and see what fun, active adventures you can dream up: hiking, biking, kite-flying, visiting an amusement park, challenging your older kids to a game of kick-the-can. Anything that gets the whole family moving!

## Say It: “I Am Active, Fit and Healthy”

Fitting more activity into an already busy schedule is more difficult in real life than it is on paper. There will be times in your life when 30 minutes a day, five days a week just won't happen. Don't give up! Instead, adopt “I am active, fit and healthy” as a daily affirmation, and strive to fulfill it by prioritizing your own wellbeing. Use the ideas in this article to find time for enjoyable, active pursuits whenever you can, with the goal of making physical activity a regular part of your daily life. Eventually, your active lifestyle will become part of who you are.